WOMEN OF MODERN INDIA

II. KASTURBA GANDHI

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WOMEN OF MODERN INDIA

Kasturba Gandhi

GRADE II

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KASTURBA GANDHI

Kasturba Gandhi died on 22 February 1944 at 7.35 in the evening. This sad news spread very quickly, not only in India but all over the world. In India people wished to honour the memory of this noble woman, and in many towns and villages of India the shops, schools and colleges were closed and students met and showed their respect for Kasturba.

A few days after her death the people of India set apart the 5th of March as a day of mourning. It was called Kasturba Day. There were meetings everywhere, and people were told what she had done for her country. One speaker said that Kasturba would live for

ever with the other great women of India. He said, 'She will ever be known as a model wife, for she loved and served and followed her great husband, Gandhiji, all her life.'

Another person said that she was rightly known as 'Ba' for she was a mother to everyone. She had that sweetness which one finds in a mother. A mother very often gives all her love only to her own children, but Kasturba was a mother to thousands of people. Another said, 'She was a true companion to Gandhiji. She was like Sita

KASTURBA GANDHI

and Savitri. As Sita had only one thought, to obey and serve Rama, so she had only one desire, to serve Gandhiji. As Savitri gave up everything for the sake of her husband Satyavana, so she lived only that she might help her husband.'

I am sure you will now want to know more about the life of this kind woman.

1. CHILDHOOD AND MARRIAGE

Kasturba was born at Porbander in 1869, in the same year in which Gandhiji was born.

We do not know much about the childhood of Kasturba. No one has written anything about it, but a few things are clear. She spent her childhood like other girls of that time. She did not go

to school and did not learn to read and write. This was so because parents disliked sending their daughters to school. They thought only boys should learn to read and write. Kasturba, however, was lucky in one way. She was born in a home which was a rich home and it was a home full of love. Her parents loved their children very much and the brothers and sisters loved each other, Kasturba learnt at a very early age what a real home was and saw how it should be looked after. She learnt how to hold all the members of a family together. She knew that this could only be done by love. All her life she tried to make every ashram which Gandhiji set up a real home.

You will be surprised to hear that Kasturba was only seven years old when her parents made arrangements for her to marry Gandhiji. Such things do not happen today because people do not like early marriages, but at that time it was thought right for children to marry early. Gandhiji's father, Karamchand or Kaba Gandhi, who was Dewan of Porbander, and Kasturba's father, Gokuldas Makamji, a rich merchant at Porbander, were great friends. They wanted to make their friendship stronger. Both of them felt that this could be done if they joined their families through marriage. Gokuldas had a daughter and Karamchand had a son. Both these children were of the same

age, and therefore the parents felt it would be a good thing for them to be married. The parents did not know at that time that they were doing something which was to be very important. They never thought that Gandhiji would become such a great man one day, and that his wife would play such an important part in his life.

The wedding took place six years later, in 1882, when Kasturba was about thirteen years old. We do not know what Kasturba thought about it at that time, but we know what Gandhiji felt. In the story of his life Gandhiji says that he was happy to get married. This does not mean that he understood what he was doing. He was only a boy and it made him feel very impor-

tant. He was too young to know that it was not good for children to marry. To be getting married was such great fun. He was given fine clothes to wear, and his relations had rich dinners for many days. Drums were beaten and songs were sung. It was more fun when Gandhiji, with his family and friends, set out for Kasturba's house. Perphaps he was riding a horse at that time, and everybody looked at the happy boy. He was a small boy and he must have felt that he was really a big person for that day. He must also have thought that he would now have a new friend to play with. Perhaps Kasturba felt the same way too.

So the two children were married. How did Kasturba fit into her

new home? Her new family looked upon her as a very good girl, and everyone was pleased with her. She worked hard and looked after the new home. She was obedient to Gandhiji's mother and did what she was told.

Kasturba could not read or write when she was married. Nor did she wish to do so. She should not be blamed for this because in those days very few girls and women thought that it was good for them to study. Gandhiji wanted to teach her but could not. In the first place, she did not want to learn. In the second place, she could only do so at night when she saw Gandhiji alone. So she learnt very slowly. At first she could only read and write simple Gujarati. Gandhiji,

however, was sorry that she could not do better than this. She, too, felt sorry. Whenever she travelled and saw people reading books and newspapers, she said, 'I wish I too could read like that.' As time went on she learnt as much Gujarati as she could. She read the Bhagavadgita and even learnt it by heart. It is said that whenever she was feeling tired she closed her eyes and repeated the Gita. She said this rested her body, mind and soul. She also liked people to read to her from good books, and she always wanted to hear what was happening in India and the world; so someone always read to her from a daily newspaper.

2. MOTHERHOOD

It was in 1888 that Kasturba had her first baby. It was a boy, and later she had two more sons. She had no daughter of her own and this made her very sad. She was a kind and good mother, not only to her own sons but also to many others. Anyone who knew her, even for a short time, felt she was a mother before everything else.

When she grew older Kasturba was a mother to all who lived in Gandhiji's ashram. Everyone looked upon her as their 'Ba'. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and people of other lands, all felt she loved them as she loved her own children.

There is a story told of her when she was in Gujarat and her

husband was in prison. She asked men and women to learn how to spin. With her went a young man. After some time his mother came to her and said, ‘ I want to take back my son. He has been away from home for some time and now I want him to be with me.’ ‘ Why ? ’ asked Kasturba. ‘ He is doing good work. He is doing something for his motherland.’ ‘ He is my only son,’ said the woman, ‘ and I always feel unhappy when he is away from home. I am lonely when he is not with me.’ ‘ You are lucky,’ said Kasturba. ‘ You have only one son to worry about. I have three and have to worry about all of them. They are all away from me. They are all working for Hindustan. Tell me, have you a

daughter ? ' The woman said, ' I have only one daughter but she is also away. She is married and lives at her husband's home.' ' You are lucky,' said Kasturba. ' More lucky than I am. At least you have a daughter of your own. How fine it must be to have a daughter who loves you. I have never had a daughter, so I adopted Laxmi. You must have heard of her. She came from a Harijan family. I brought her up as my own daughter, but even she is away from me. Just think of me. I am all alone. Bapu is away. My sons are not with me and even my daughter Laxmi is somewhere else. Yet I am happy. What makes me happy is that all my family are working for Hindustan.'

In 1887 Gandhiji went to England to study. When he was away Kasturba lived at Rajkot with Gandhiji's mother. She was a very noble woman. Gandhiji has told us in the story of his life how much she taught him. Kasturba too learnt much from her.

When Gandhiji came back from England he started work as a lawyer in Bombay. But he was not happy. Then he went to Rajkot and worked there. Soon he was able to have a home of his own which was looked after by Kasturba. Of course Kasturba looked after their home well, but Gandhiji was not always pleased with her. Once he became so angry with her that he sent her away from the house. She was very sad and went to her father's

house and lived there for some time. But soon Gandhiji was sorry for what he had done and he went and brought her home again. He was very sorry because he had been so unkind. But Kasturba was not angry with Gandhiji. She looked upon her husband as her lord whom she must always try to please.

3. LIFE IN SOUTH AFRICA

In 1893 Gandhiji went to South Africa to fight as a lawyer in the courts for an Indian firm. He did not take Kasturba with him. She lived alone for three years and then Gandhiji came back to India. He had not been in India very long when he was called back to South Africa. He was ready to

go back, but he did not want to leave Kasturba again so he took her and the children with him. This was the first time Kasturba had been on a ship and when they were getting close to South Africa there was a terrible storm. When Kasturba arrived in South Africa she and the children were dressed like Parsees, for Gandhiji wanted them to dress that way. Kasturba disliked wearing the Parsee sari but she would not disobey her husband even though what he had asked her to do made her unhappy.

Kasturba was with Gandhiji in South Africa for nine years and during this time many things happened. Gandhiji had been working for the Indians in South Africa and they gave him many gifts of gold watches, gold chains

and diamond rings. They thought they would thank him in this way for his work. But Gandhiji did not like it. He had made up his mind to lead a simple life, and he did not want such things. He believed that a man who does good to others should not get anything from them in return. These gifts were a kind of reward for what he had done. For some time he madeuphismindto return the gifts. First of all he had a talk with his sons, and they all agreed with him. Then he spoke about it to his wife, but she did not agree. She said, 'It is true I do not need them. It is also true that my children do not want them. But what about the girls my sons marry? You have made *sadhus* of my boys,

but their wives will not like that. You should not give these gifts back. Keep them for my sons' wives.' Kasturba too had been given a necklace. She thought that it was hers and that she should keep it. Gandhiji, however, felt that it had been given to her because of him. For a long time Kasturba refused to return the necklace, but at last she knew Gandhiji was right and so she gave the necklace back. She knew that it was better to work for others without getting anything in return.

In 1904 Gandhiji started an ashram at Phoenix, where everyone had to do some work with their hands. Kasturba gladly did her share of the work. She and her children would grind the corn and would do many

other things gladly. She looked after all the people who lived in the ashram. An Englishman with his wife lived there and he said afterwards, 'I was as happy there as a man can be in a home of his own. My wife too was very happy.' Kasturba was kind to everybody.

Kasturba was a very brave woman. While in the ashram she fell ill. She was so ill that everybody thought she would die. The doctors said she must have an operation, but she was too weak to take the medicine which would make her sleep and feel no pain. Kasturba allowed the doctor to cut open her body without taking the medicine. This was a very brave thing to do.

At that time Gandhiji had to

go away to do some work. She let him do so gladly. She was left in the care of a doctor and his wife. They were both very kind to her. But she did not get well as quickly as she should have. In fact, she slowly became worse and worse. She became so weak that she could not sit up in her bed. She was not able to talk to anyone. The doctor was afraid that she would die while Gandhiji was away. He wrote to Gandhiji and asked him if he could give Kasturba some meat and soup to make her strong. Gandhiji said that he could give her anything to eat, if she would eat it. When Kasturba was told, she said she would not eat meat. She said, 'I care for my *dharma* more than for my life.' The doctor was

angry, and asked Gandhiji to take her away from his home. Gandhiji came back and took Kasturba away. Though she was very weak she said, 'Don't be afraid. I shall be all right.' She did not get well for a long time. She said later that it was her *dharma* that had saved her.

Everyone knows that in South Africa Gandhiji was sent to jail. At first only men went with him to jail. After some time women joined his work and said they would go to jail too. Gandhiji chose about fifteen women to do what is called *satyagraha*. Kasturba was not one of them. Gandhiji did not tell her about it. He did not want to make her do something which she might not like. So he left her alone. This

made her angry. She went to Gandhiji and said, 'I will follow you as other women are doing. I have made up my mind about it. I promise that I will not do anything which will bring shame to you or to me.' So she went to jail with her husband. To her the greatest happiness lay in following in the footsteps of Gandhiji. She felt that only by doing so could she be a happy woman.

It was in 1906 that Gandhiji took the vow of Brahmacharya. He had been thinking of doing so for some years, but it was in 1906 that he made up his mind to do it. He did not tell Kasturba anything about it. He spoke to her only after he had made up his mind. It meant that from then on Gandhiji and Kasturba were

not to live as husband and wife, and were not to have any more children. Gandhiji did not know what Kasturba would say. But she immediately agreed with him. After this a great change came over both of them. Gandhiji and Kasturba both began to live wholly for the good of others.

4. RETURN TO INDIA

In 1915 Gandhiji came back to India with Kasturba and the children. In 1916 the Satyagraha Ashram was founded at Ahmedabad. About twenty-five men and women joined this ashram, and they all looked upon Kasturba as their mother. Every one of them felt that he was a member of the family. They all lived simply and

all had their food from the same kitchen. It was Kasturba who looked after this kitchen. She did not give orders to others but looked after everything herself. Mrs Sarojini Naidu visited this ashram, and wrote about Kasturba's life there. She found her modest. She was weak in body but strong in mind. She went about her work quietly. Even though she had many things to do, she remained patient. She looked after the sick with the care of a mother, and she did everything to make the ashram a happy place to live in. She worked with her own hands and worked without taking any rest. She was, in every way, a noble woman.

She cooked and served meals, not only to the members, but also

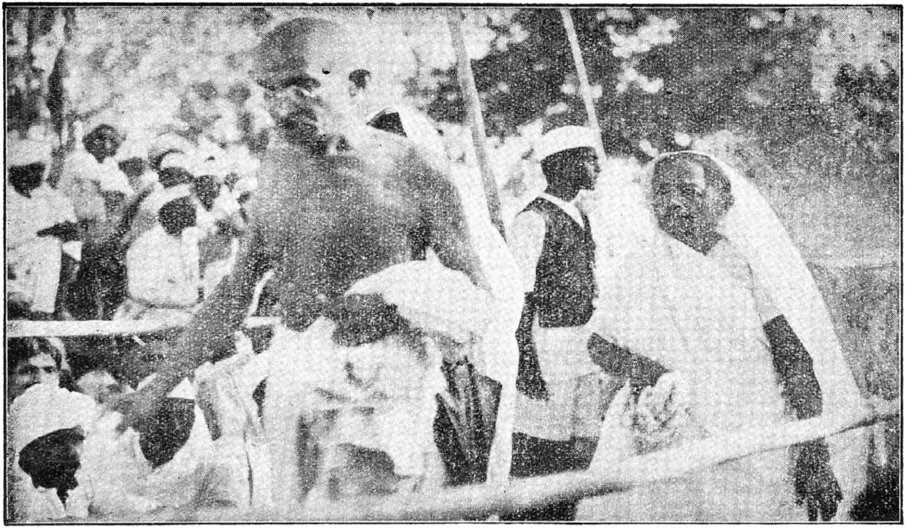
to the guests. Sometimes these guests came without letting her know. Then Kasturba had to work harder than before, but she did not mind. One day Pandit Motilal Nehru and a few others came after the midday meal was over. Kasturba had just gone to her room to rest. Gandhiji did not want to ask her to work again so he asked others in the ashram to get the meal ready. They went to the kitchen and started cooking. Suddenly a brass plate fell on the floor and made a great noise. Kasturba heard it and woke up. She thought a cat was in the kitchen, so she went in and was surprised to find that other women were cooking the meal. She went to Gandhiji and wanted to know why she had not been asked to

get the meal ready. 'Do you think I am lazy?' she asked. 'Why did you not wake me? I am not yet so old as to be unable to do this little work.' 'I was afraid to wake you,' said Gandhiji. 'You afraid of me,' said Kasturba, 'I can never think that.' Then she smiled very sweetly and went to the kitchen and got the meal ready. It always made her happy to do things for others.

But the peace of the ashram was once broken. A Harijan family came to live in the ashram. Gandhiji was very happy, but some members did not like it. They did not want the Harijans to have their food in the same kitchen and use the ashram as the other members did. Even Kasturba felt the same. She did

not want these Harijans in the ashram. Gandhiji spoke to all of them, but they would not listen. He felt very sad and did not eat for about seven days. Then Kasturba and the others knew they had made a mistake and been unkind. They all went to Gandhiji and said. 'We are sorry for what we have done. We were wrong to think that these Harjians were not as good as we are. We shall now look upon them as our own brothers and sisters.' After this Kasturba began to help her husband in this work for Harijans. She even took a little Harijan girl into her home and called her her daughter.

In 1917 Gandhiji went to Bihar to help the villagers of Champaran. Several women went with him to



By courtesy of 'The Times of India'

KASTURBA ATTENDS THE HARIPURA CONGRESS SESSION WITH GANDHIJI

teach the people in the villages to read and write. Kasturba was one of them. She could not give them any lessons in reading and writing, so she went to the huts of the poor people and told them how to be clean and how to be good. She liked this work very much because she loved the poor. Once she went into the cottage of a poor woman, and asked her why she did not bathe every day and why she did not wash her clothes often. The woman said, 'How can I do so when I have only one sari? Ask your husband to get me another sari, and then I shall go about in clean clothes.' Things like this Kasturba could never forget. She made up her mind to do all she could to help the poor people of India.

5. THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

Gandhiji told the people of India that their country must be freed from British rule. In 1922 he was sent to prison for six years. While Gandhiji was in prison Kasturba came forward and asked all men and women to use *Khaddar* for their clothes. She told the women to spin every day and to make thread. Kasturba did all this besides looking after the ashram because she felt it was her duty to make sure that the people did not forget the work which Gandhiji loved. She asked them to stop drinking toddy and told them not to spend too much money on marriages. She also told the men to be kind to their women, and

to teach them to read and write. She always remembered the Harijans, and said every person should love them as they loved their own brothers and sisters.

Many times during his work for India Gandhiji felt that the only way he could help his country was to fast. The fasts often lasted for many days and Gandhiji came very near to dying. Each time Kasturba helped him and looked after him. It was her patience and care which made him live. Once she was in one jail and Gandhiji in another when he started a fast. Kasturba was set free and brought to the jail in which Gandhiji was. As soon as she saw him she smiled and said, 'So you are at it again.' Then she took charge of

him and nursed him as a mother does her sick child.

In 1939 there was some trouble in the State of Rajkot. Kasturba felt she must go there and lead the *Satyagraha*. She was not well at that time and people begged her not to go. But no one could stop her. She felt it was her duty, so she went to Rajkot. As soon as she arrived in the State she was arrested and taken to a small village. Her son Devadas came to see her and felt unhappy to see his mother a prisoner in a village which was very dirty. There was no water there, nor was there any vegetable or fruit to give her. She was ill but no doctor could be found. She went through it all cheerfully till she was set free. She would never give up her

duty to fight for the rights of her people.

In 1939 Gandhiji called to the whole country telling the people not to help the British in the war they were fighting against Germany. In 1942 the Congress said that only a free India could take part in the war against Japan. Then all the Congress leaders were arrested and Gandhiji was taken to live as a prisoner in the Aga Khan's palace in Poona. The next day Kasturba was arrested too and taken to live with Gandhiji in Poona. She lived there as she had lived at other places, looking after Gandhiji and his other friends. But on 19 March 1943 it was learnt that she had had two heart attacks during one week. On 4 December 1943 people

heard again that she was ill. She was now very ill and she asked the Government to let her see her sons and grandsons. Her son, Devadas, who went to see her said that she was unhappy in that large palace and she wanted to go back to the cottages of Sevagram. Even though she was ill and in prison she said, ' I wish others could be set free, even though Gandhiji is kept in jail.'

She grew worse and worse every day. Two things had made her very unhappy. Mahadev Desai, Gandhiji's well-loved secretary, had died in Poona. He was like a son to Kasturba and his death made her very sad. Gandhiji too had fasted for twenty-one days, and this worried her very much. But she said, ' No harm will come

to Gandhiji. He will live. I know I shall have to leave the world earlier than he.' Looking after Gandhiji had made her very tired. She felt that she would not leave the palace alive. She even gave away to others the few things she had. She was now very weak and on 20 February the whole of India knew how ill she was. At 3 o'clock on the 22nd of February she sent for her son Devadas and told him that she was dying. 'I must go,' she said, 'why not today?' Then she sat up in her bed. She bowed her head, joined her hands together and began to pray. She said, 'I ask for your mercy, oh God! You are my protector.'

In the meantime a new medicine called penicillin had been

brought to the palace. This is a medicine which can cure pneumonia. But the doctors were not willing to try it because they felt it would not help Kasturba. Even Gandhiji thought the same. He said to Devadas, 'You cannot cure your mother now for no medicine will do her good. She is in God's hands.' He had hardly said this when he received a call from Kasturba. He went to her and sat by her and let her lean against his shoulder. At 7.30 that evening she died. It was the night of Shivaratri. Gandhiji was very sad. Before the body was placed on the pile of wood passages were read from the Quran, the Bhagvadgita and the Bible. A few hymns were sung. Last of all, as it is done by the Hindus, a

few of her bones were taken to Allahabad and dropped into the sacred Ganges. Her ashes were thrown into the river Indrayani near Poona.

In memory of this good woman the people of India collected Rs. 80,00,000 which will be spent in helping the women and children of India.

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